

The History of the Crusades Podcast presents  
Reconquista: The Rise of Al-Andalus and the Reconquest of Spain  
Episode 6  
Abd al-Rahman

Hello again. Last time we saw a number of power shifts take place on the Iberian peninsula. With the settlement of the 10,000 strong Syrian army in Al-Andalus, the power base of the ruling Arab minority was strengthened, but the newly settled Syrians brought their own political goals with them. When we left the last episode, a Syrian with ties to the Qaysi family, which encompassed the members of the Umayyad dynasty in Damascus, had risen to power and was governing Al-Andalus. This governor, a man called Yusuf al-Fihri, found himself to be the independent ruler of Al-Andalus after the fall from power of the Umayyad dynasty. However, the last surviving member of that dynasty is currently in exile in northern Africa, and is indicating to anyone who will listen that he really wouldn't mind popping on a ship and sailing over to the sunny shores of the Iberian peninsula.

To be fair, the young exiled prince, a man called Abd al-Rahman ibn Mu'awiya, did do his best to remain where he was and carve out a piece of northern Africa for himself. For around five years, he attempted to rise to power in various places, starting in Tunisia, but he was thwarted at every turn by the local governors and their allies.

Abd al-Rahman was actually really keen to settle in northern Africa. His mother had originally come from the western reaches of northern Africa, from a group of Berbers known as the Nafza Berbers. As a young woman his mother had been forcibly removed from her homeland and had been sent to Damascus as a prize for the Caliph, and her son was now keen to return to his mother's people and settle amongst them. However the local rulers just weren't that happy for an outsider, no matter how fine his pedigree, to usurp them from power.

Abd al-Rahman's right hand man, a freedman called Badir, discovered that a bunch of Nafza Berbers had relocated to the Iberian peninsula so he sent messages to them, and also reached out to some sympathetic supporters of the Umayyad dynasty who had previously settled in Al-Andalus. Fortunately for Abd al-Rahman, who had by now completely outstayed his welcome in northern Africa and was fast running out of options, Badir found some support, enough support in fact to justify Badir travelling personally to Al-Andalus to test the waters, to see whether Abd al-Rahman might somehow fit into the power structure inside Al-Andalus. Badir quickly familiarised himself with the political situation in Al-Andalus, and made contact with the man behind the throne on the peninsula, al-Sumayl, to garner his support. However, al-Sumayl's opinion of the young prince, and of the powerful Umayyad clan, had not altered from the attitude we saw in the last episode. In fact, Badir's approach to al-Sumayl caused him to close ranks with the other members of the Qaysi tribe in Al-Andalus. Before long, al-Sumayl, along with the governor of Al-Andalus, Yusuf al-Fihri, had formed a united front against the arrival of Abd al-Rahman.

With that door now firmly closed, Badir approached the Berber and Yemeni Arabs on the peninsula, and finding them more amenable to the idea of the last surviving member of the Umayyad dynasty coming to Al-Andalus, arrangements were made and deals were struck, with the result that, late in the year 755, Abd al-Rahman sailed across the strait and disembarked on the southern coast of the Iberian peninsula. He was given accommodation in the homes of some local supporters, then he sat back and thought

about how best to proceed. According to Hugh Kennedy in his book "Muslim Spain and Portugal, A Political History Of Al-Andalus", Abd al-Rahman decided to see whether he could come to some sort of agreement with al-Sumayl and Yusuf al-Fihri, so he reached out to them with a view to coming to a mutually beneficial arrangement. But this didn't work, so Abd al-Rahman fell back to Plan B. Plan B involved him, raising an army, then confronting Yusuf al-Fihri, and defeating him in battle.

Now, it must have been a bit of an ask, as a newcomer to a land, to reach out to local people who you are a stranger to, and ask them to lay down their lives in support of you being able to achieve your political goals, but Abd al-Rahman must have been a persuasive young man. He spent a year forming relationships with the different political groups inside Al-Andalus, basically by leveraging his status as the last surviving member of the Umayyad dynasty, and by building on opposition to Yusuf's rule.

By the spring of the following year, 756, he had recruited a 2,000 strong army consisting primarily of anti-Yusuf Umayyad supporters and Yemeni Syrians. He led his army to Cordoba and faced, then defeated Yusuf's forces.

On Friday the 14th of May 756, Abd al-Rahman was proclaimed Emir, or ruler, of Al-Andalus, in the mosque at Cordoba. As Hugh Kennedy states, the proclamation of Abd al-Rahman as Emir was, and I quote "not the end of the Umayyad seizure of power in al-Andalus, but only the end of the beginning" end quote. To put it another way, once Abd al-Rahman was declared to be the Emir of Al-Andalus, the real work actually began, as he strived to consolidate his hold on power in the peninsula.

Clearly having inherited some talent for politics and the art of ruling from his illustrious forebears, Abd al-Rahman decided that his aim would be to establish himself as the dynastic ruler of Al-Andalus, which primarily meant working to make his hold on power strong enough and successful enough that there would be little or no opposition to his sons, grandsons, and great grandsons taking the reins of power after his death.

How did Abd al-Rahman go about doing this? Well, his first aim was to establish himself as the independent ruler of Al-Andalus, meaning that no person from outside the peninsula, whether it be the governor of Northern Africa or the new caliph in Baghdad, would be able to interfere in the politics of, or governance of, Al-Andalus. After being in power for only one year, he had the name of the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad removed from mention in Friday prayers in Cordoba, a move which indicated that Al-Andalus was under no caliph's thumb.

Now, had we been able to zoom down to Abd al-Rahman in the year after he had seized power, we might have been able to let him know that he will succeed in his goals, and that he will in fact rule Al-Andalus as Emir for the next 33 years. For a young newcomer with no political experience to rock up and defeat all enemies from without and within, and rule over a vast territory for over three decades, is really rather impressive, so the question we need to ask ourselves is "How did he do it"?

Well, firstly, he leveraged his main advantage for all he was worth, that advantage being the fact that he was the last surviving member of the Umayyad dynasty. The members of the Umayyad dynasty could trace their ancestry back to the Prophet Muhammad, and that was a distinction which placed him above other contenders for power inside the Iberian peninsula. This connection meant that there were a core group of supporters inside Al-Andalus who would always back him to the hilt, no matter what transpired. It also meant

that Al-Andalus became a magnet for distant relatives from the Umayyad dynasty and for powerful men who had previously supported the Umayyad family. Many of these people made their way to Al-Andalus once Abd al-Rahman rose to power, and were granted lands upon which they could settle, a move which increased Abd al-Rahman's support base inside the peninsula. Careful not to sideline any Muslims inside Al-Andalus, Abd al-Rahman confiscated land from Christian land owners to give to the newcomers. Interestingly, in his book "Muslim Spain and Portugal: A Political History Of Al-Andalus", Hugh Kennedy reports that one of the Christian lords who lost land in this way was none other than the Visigothic Lord Theodemir, of written pact with Abd al-Aziz fame, from Episode Four. I guess that Abd al-Rahman may not have felt himself bound by agreements made between landowners and a previous Muslim ruler.

The second way in which Abd al-Rahman was able to maintain his hold on power, was to slowly but surely defeat all his opponents, both within Al-Andalus and outside the peninsula.

The opposition to his rule from outside the peninsula came primarily from the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad. Pretty unhappy to hear his name dropped from Friday prayers, and to see a Muslim territory being ruled over by a member of the defeated Umayyad dynasty, the Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur made a number of attempts to infiltrate Al-Andalus, and bring the peninsula back under the thumb of Baghdad. The most audacious of these moves came in the year 763, when al-Mansur invested a Muslim from lands in what is now the country of Portugal with the title of "The True Emir of Al-Andalus" and ordered him to oppose Abd al-Rahman's rule. Abd al-Rahman was forced to raise an army and confront the want-to-be Abbasid Emir in a prolonged military confrontation at the Fortress of Carmona. In a battle which Hugh Kennedy describes as being the, and I quote "most desperate encounter of his reign" end quote, Abd al-Rahman managed to defeat the usurper.

The usurper himself was killed and Abd al-Rahman ordered his body decapitated. He then had the unfortunate man's head preserved and embalmed. Once that was done, the head was sent to the closest Abbasid outpost in Tunisia, with a note attached directing it to be sent on to the Caliph. One chronicle reports that the head did in fact make its way to Baghdad, where the Caliph was reportedly heard to thank Allah for placing so much distance between himself and the devil Abd al-Rahman. I guess I should point out that this story is not mentioned in any of the Abbasid chronicles and only gets an airing in the chronicles from Al-Andalus, meaning of course that it may never have happened. Still, it's a good story and I think it was worth mentioning.

In addition to having to deal with external threats to his rule, Abd al-Rahman also had his work cut out for him ensuring that all the different factions inside the Iberian peninsula itself were kept in line. Now, as we've seen from previous episodes, the population of Al-Andalus was made up of a wide and extremely diverse set of people. This included residents who had been living in the peninsular during the Visigothic era, so Visigothic loyalists, Hispanic locals who had been opposed to Visigothic rule, including most of the Jewish inhabitants of the peninsula, and Christians who were happy to align themselves with their new Muslim overlords. On the Muslim side of the equation there were the Arab and Berber residents who came in on the first wave of the invasion, so to speak, and the Syrians who arrived later, the Syrians themselves, of course, being divided into different tribal groups. To put it mildly, that's a lot of people to keep happy.

Impressively, Abd al-Rahman managed to rule in a way which ensured that, while many of the groups may not have been totally thrilled with his governance of the peninsula, none of the groups ever gained enough support to overthrow him. He achieved this by a very careful, persistent carrot-and-stick approach. Basically, if a group had a grievance which looked like it might get out of hand, Abd al-Rahman attempted to address the problem via cajoling, the awarding of benefits, and the dangling of carrots. If the problem persisted, then Abd al-Rahman proceeded to whack the problem with a giant stick until it was no longer an issue.

As an example of this approach, let's take a look at how Abd al-Rahman dealt with the most problematic of the groups inside Al-Andalus, the group of Qaysi Syrians led by the previous ruler of Al-Andalus, Yusuf al-Fihri, and the power behind Yusuf's throne, al-Sumayl. As we stated previously, Abd al-Rahman had defeated Yusuf in battle shortly before he was declared ruler of Al-Andalus, but in an attempt to appease the Qaysi Syrians inside Al-Andalus, Abd al-Rahman did not order the execution of either of the two men after his victory. Instead, they were allowed to keep their possessions and were encouraged to settle down somewhere and live the rest of their lives quietly and peacefully.

Yusuf started in the right way. He was allowed to keep his residence in Cordoba, and for a while he did manage to keep quiet and stay out of trouble, under the watchful eye of Abd al-Rahman and his supporters. But eventually it got too much for him. He escaped from Cordoba and made his way to Merida, where he rallied his support base, which consisted of a bunch of Berber fighters and supporters of the Fihri family. He managed to raise an army which was large enough to challenge Abd al-Rahman, but the army was defeated by men loyal to Abd al-Rahman. Following the battle, Abd al-Rahman ordered Yusuf to be executed.

However, despite the loss of their patriarch, the Fihri family continued to be a thorn in Abd al-Rahman's side, particularly around the city of Toledo, where they enjoyed the most support. Abd al-Rahman took a big stick to the Fihris in the year 764, when two of his trusted commanders defeated the new Fihri leader on the battlefield, and then executed him. Twenty years later the big stick was again used, when one of Yusuf's sons attempted an uprising around Toledo. Again, his army was defeated by Abd al-Rahman's troops, and Yusuf's son was executed.

With this carrot-and-stick approach, Abd al-Rahman was eventually able to achieve his goal. While the previous rulers of Al-Andalus had only really been able to exercise power around the city of Cordoba and across the particular group they represented, Abd al-Rahman gradually pushed his reach out from Cordoba across all Muslim-held areas on the Iberian peninsula, until eventually just about every Muslim on the peninsula submitted to rule from Cordoba.

Abd al-Rahman's main legacy, then, was to cement Muslim rule in Al-Andalus, and to establish Cordoba as the base from which his rules spread out across the peninsula.

To emphasise the importance of Cordoba, Abd al-Rahman ordered a new mosque to be built in the city. Construction started on the building in the year 785 and although Abd al-Rahman himself died in 788, only three years after the building work commenced, the mosque was eventually finished, and has in fact been expanded and improved upon across the centuries. Impressively, it's still in Cordoba today, and is a spectacular building.

Can the Umayyad rule in Al-Andalus survive Abd al-Rahman's death? Well, you'll need to join me next time to find out. Until next time, bye for now.

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